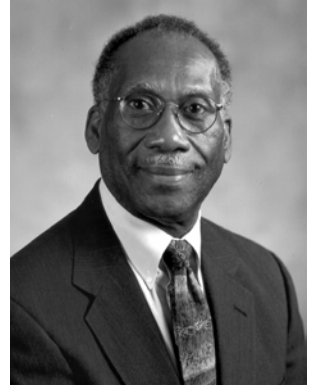


# A Word to the Wise...

## The Power of the Collective WE

by Charles D. Johnson

Director, Illinois Department on Aging



After we have passed the half century mark, most of us tend to become a bit more selective about the activities that engage us. For years, many of us who volunteer have recognized that volunteer activity is an important source of satisfaction, sociability and self validation.

But with age, most people begin a process of selection. The mature person develops a personal strategy to decide which opportunities to pursue and which to let pass. As we become older and wiser, we begin to look more acutely for meaning; we want to do something that is emotionally satisfying. And, most important, we want to make a difference.

According to research published in a recent issue of *The Gerontologist*, mature volunteers tend to eliminate the fluff that is meaningless activity for activity's sake, and concentrate, instead, on volunteer effort that is meaningful. Based on this finding, that I know from personal experience to be true, I have initiated a new effort that I sincerely believe to be meaningful, a way for you to offer real, concrete help to people in your community.

This is a sales effort. I want to sell you something. I want to convince you that the mission of service and advocacy held dear by the Department on Aging is an

important one. I want you to believe that there is a critical, even a life-saving reason to get our message out. And I want to convince you that you are needed.

Each of the singular you is needed to become the collective WE that will represent our mission of the Department on Aging in this, a first pilot project that will soon spread from your neighborhood to every town, in every city, all over the state.

Like most good salesmen, I am sold on the product myself. Over-sold, actually.

I have worked in the aging network for more than three decades, and I know, first-hand the importance of the programs and services offered by the Department. I know, and I have met, seniors who go without life-saving drugs because the rent is due. They may be unaware of the programs we have set up to help with the cost of drugs. We need to reach out to tell them about Illinois Cares Rx, a new program that replaces SeniorCare and the Circuit Breaker Pharmaceutical Assistance Program, coordinates with the new Medicare Part D to cover the premiums, co-pays and gaps in coverage left by the federal pharmaceutical program. Other benefits for Illinoisans include I-SaveRx, which offers refills on prescriptions that are

imported from

licensed pharmacies to cut in half the cost of most drugs and the Illinois Rx Buying Club that offers discounts at local pharmacies on all FDA-approved drugs.

I know, and my heart aches for, seniors who are assigned to care in nursing homes only because they were unaware that other choices are available to them, choices that could have been explained by counselors at the Department on Aging.

I know that there are people in nursing homes today who could be helped in re-establishing their lives in the community – if only they knew of Community Care and other programs through the Department on Aging that are designed to do just that.

I know, though sometimes I wish that I did **not** know, that elder abuse **does** occur in our communities, and that help is available through the Department on Aging. But, sadly, our neighbors may not be aware that help is available, and that this help is one of our first priorities.

And I know that there are families throughout our state charged with the important task of caregiving, offering care to grandchildren, care to disabled adult children and care to frail spouses and loved ones. These

Would you like to become a WE volunteer? Call 1-217-557-0419  
or e-mail the Illinois Department on Aging at [outreach@illinois.gov](mailto:outreach@illinois.gov)

people are often hanging on by a thread because caregiving is an arduous task, exacting from caregivers social, physical and economic sacrifices that are often overwhelming. These people would find respite, support and practical help if they knew to call upon the Department on Aging.

But far too many members of these groups do not know that help is there for them. They don't know because we simply do not have the funds or the staff to get the word out. I don't need to tell you that our state, like all of the others, is experiencing a trying time of increasing demands and tightening budgets. In addition, our Governor has vowed to hold the line on taxes while at the same time meeting the needs of our most vulnerable neighbors.

To intensify the challenge, the population of vulnerable older adults is multiplying, as medical and technological advances have increased life expectancy.

Most states have met this increase in the population of the frail elderly with cuts in service. Not in Illinois. I am proud to say that our state has, in fact, done just the opposite.

We have opened the doors to service through the Community Care Program by increasing the asset limit for eligibility from \$12,500 to \$17,500. I am proud of this, and you should be, too, because it will increase the quality of life for hundreds of our elders by keeping them out of nursing homes.

In another move to support care in the community, we have increased the rate of homemaker service, as well as the adult-day-service rates, evidence of our

respect for the worker, as well as the task.

And our state has led the nation in its response to the need for help with the cost of prescription drugs.

But the state's concern for its elders has been confined to support through programs and services. There has been no cash for public relations and fluff. That is the right thing to do, I am convinced of it, and I am proud to be part of an administration that makes value judgments of this sort.

However, and this is a big, important, however: There is simply no money for getting the word out.

And that is why I have initiated a new program called Wise Elders.

Now I am inviting you to become a Wise Elder. I am inviting you to help us get the word out. To go into your neighborhoods, your community meetings, your places of worship. And to say this: **WE** are there for you.

I am inviting you to represent the Illinois Department on Aging as a Wise Elder, to give out our telephone number, to tell your neighbors that help is available and to help them connect to the help they need. I am inviting you to speak at meetings, to serve on committees, to attend conferences. I am inviting you to serve as an important link between questions and answers; between need and service.

And I am inviting you to join me in assuring Illinoisans that **WE** are always there when you need us. I hope you will find meaning in this new program; and I hope that you, the singular, will become **WE** the plural.

## Can you become a Wise Elder?

Ask yourself these questions:

- **Would you describe yourself as a responsible citizen?**  
Thank your mother.  
One of the top motivations among older volunteers is a sense of personal responsibility to help others.
- **Do you want to make a difference in your own community?**  
Be our representative; bring the Department on Aging home.
- **Do you want to offer your talents and energy to a group that serves interests you share?**  
WE need you.
- **Do you want to become part of the civic process?**  
**Interact with elected officials; attend neighborhood or local government meetings?**  
Help us spread the word about changes in Medicare and state support for the elderly and disabled people in your community.

Come with us. We are starting an exciting journey.

Together, **WE** can make a difference. ■